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'Bicentennial Essays on Jane Austen's Afterlives'

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Special Issue of *Women's Writing*: Bicentennial Essays on Jane Austen's Afterlives

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Introduction

This special issue of *Women's Writing* is concerned with the changing approaches to Jane Austen, her writings, and her afterlives over the past 200 years. The issue reflects on and broadens our understanding of the cultural reach and reimaginings of Austen in view of the bicentennial celebrations of her published novels from 2011 to 2018. Articles are concerned with Austen's national and international reputation, her critical reception, creative appropriations of her texts, Austen's afterlives in popular culture, in visual media, in ephemeral publications, in stage, film, musical and transmedia versions. Together, the essays shed new light on some of the complex reception processes and legacies of this enduringly popular author. They also set out possible paths for the study of Austen in coming years.

In the first essay, Susan Civalé explores how *Austentatious* (2012 to date), a one-hour comedy improvisation play of Austen's 'lost' works, blends Regency and twenty-first-century popular culture, narrative and gags, 'Austenspeak' and modern slang, and ultimately parodies not only the original novels but the phenomenon of Austen adaptation itself. Christopher Nagle, in the second essay, discusses twenty-first-century musical theatre versions of Austen's novels, highlighting the challenges of turning the texts into a size and scale suitable for stage vocalization. He focuses particularly on *Austen's Pride: A New Musical of Pride and Prejudice* (2016) and the ways in which it frames the narrative as a tale of the author's creative process. The genre of literary mash-up, in particular Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and Ben H. Winter's *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (2009), is interrogated by Rebecca Soares in the issue's third essay. She proposes a theory of penetrative reading that highlights the disruptive and often violent potential of the reader. Commodifying not only the words of Austen but also the catch-phrases, key terms, and concepts of feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial literary theory, these hybrid narratives interrogate and satirize the very act of scholarly interpretation. Lana Dalley, in the fourth essay, places *Mansfield Park* within its political and economical context, a timely approach given Austen's appearance on the Bank of England £10 and the recent biography that marked its launch, Emma J. Clery's *Jane Austen: The Banker's Sister* (2017). Dalley analyses the way the novel is preoccupied with the value of things, particularly the economic realities and prospects of its characters, but also the extent to which economic thinking influences their understanding of the world around them, and the people and objects that populate it. The fifth essay focuses on the ways Austen was marketed in the USA in the early nineteenth century. In particular, Emily Schultheis argues that Carey & Lea of Philadelphia's 1830s editions of the novels gave Austen status as an author she had not yet achieved in Britain during this period, being billed in the firm's advertisements as a "top author".

Annika Bautz, in the sixth essay of this issue, explores the reception of Austen's texts in the late nineteenth century, specifically through an analysis of introductions to editions published in the 1890s. The essay shows that for introduction writers, the most important Austenian elements were realism and humour. They also emphasised Austen as a female genius whose art, especially her satire, had a masculine quality, and who never overstepped female boundaries, a view that would have influenced many thousands of readers' engagement with Austen's texts. In the seventh essay, Rebecca White investigates the element of escapism in Austen's reception, from the first World War to twenty-first-century fanvids. Using the early twentieth century as a reference point, White focuses on a selection of YouTube fanvids, as well as *Austenland* (2013), to interrogate the complex interplay between hypotext and paratext, past and present, in the Austenian flight from "guilt and misery" (*Mansfield Park*). Stephanie Russo, in the eighth essay, explores how Pemberley Digital's transmedia adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-13) and *Emma Approved* (2013-14) render the texts malleable to transmedia storytelling and play out over multiple digital platforms including online video, blog posts, and social media, turning Austen into a marketable, profitable commodity for twenty-first-century consumers. Irony as a quintessential Austenian quality that poses a challenge to adaptations and translations is the subject of Marie Nedregotten Sørbø's essay, the ninth in this issue. She explores how screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, as well as five different Norwegian translations, struggle in similar ways when trying to portray Austen's ironic narrative style, ways which inform their interpretations of the texts. In the final essay, Sarah Wootton explores the portrayal of female authorship in Austen biopics, specifically Julian Jarrold's *Becoming Jane* (2007) and Jeremy Lovering's *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008). She shows how the visual styles of these biopics engage in a cinematic conversation with Austen's past 'lives' and her present cultural moment as well as with the narrative style, mood, and tone of her novels. Austen's authorship in the twenty-first century ultimately rests on and is transfigured by a rapidly evolving nexus of co-readings between text and screen.

Overall, the essays shed new light on critical, popular, creative, digital afterlives of Austen, on adaptations and appropriations, on her national and international reputation, and on ways in which readers have engaged with her novels over the last 200 years. The issue reengages with debates over Austen, her continuing appeal and significance as an author and a lucrative brand, her unique cultural standing and ubiquity. These essays advance innovative readings of her novels and her transmedia legacies, and open up new directions for the future study of this author, her works, and an ever-expanding, diversifying afterlife that shows no signs of slowing down.